

HMD AT AVANTI SCHOOL

The students

For a number of years Belmont has hosted students from local high schools for a Holocaust education programme in Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations. Lockdowns put face to face sessions on hold but we did send Avanti School two videos – a generic introduction to the Holocaust and a video specially made for Belmont by Gail Rigler of Texas describing her mother’s teen years and rescue by 10 British prisoners of war.

The students wrote some very thoughtful essays as follow up work. Four examples follow, one of which shows only the first and last sentences, about how we should be with our fellow man – which says it all, really.

We think that in these interesting essays you will see some of the impact of Holocaust education programming.

Student A

As soon as Adolf Hitler came into power in 1933, life got progressively worse for Jews all over Europe, not to mention several other minority groups who the Nazis deemed as inferior. The first concentration camp, Dachau, was established less than two months after Hitler was appointed as the Chancellor of Germany. Initially, the writing of Jewish authors was publicly burned along with their businesses being boycotted in Germany. This was the least of what was to come. Jewish Eastern European immigrants were stripped of their citizenship, just within six months of Hitler being in power. He formulated the Nazi ideology that the Aryan race was superior in terms of their attitude, behaviour, and capability, leading to the introduction of the Nuremberg laws in 1935. The Nazis wanted their antisemitic beliefs to be put into law. This resulted in only ‘racially pure’ Germans being allowed to hold German citizenship, Jews were identified as a separate race with no civil or political rights in their own country. For Hitler’s master race to not be ‘degenerated,’ Jews were prevented from marrying those with pure German blood through the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour.

Throughout the course of the 1930s, after Hitler’s rise, the conditions for Jews got worse, beginning with boycotting their shops to then physically attacking their synagogues, homes and expelling the Jewish children from all schools. The concentration camps were built ultimately to incarcerate the targeted minority groups – Gypsies, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, Afro-Germans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, people with disabilities, the mentally ill, gay people, and the greatest target of all – the Jews. Away from judicial review, the Nazis were able to exploit the prisoners, force them into hard labour, mental torture and murder them. They believed that it was their obligation to subdue and exterminate these ‘sub-human’ races.

Antisemitism was deeply ingrained in many parts of Europe, as many Christians viewed the Jews as the ‘Christ Killers’. They were even blamed for the German loss of WWI. They were cast as the scapegoats in many European countries. However, Hannah Rigler, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, began life in a small Lithuanian town, completely unbeknownst to the Nazi attitude towards Jews and their mission to totally annihilate them. Jewish people made up a third of her town and they were well integrated into the community, not treated with hostility or discrimination. The Russians invaded Lithuania and wreaked havoc in the country. The Germans then invaded in 1941 and the Lithuanians believed that they would be more civilised and reasonable than the Russians – which could not be further from the truth. Hannah and her family were forced to live in ghettos in terrible conditions. After moving ghetto four times, in 1944, all Jews were moved from the ghettos to death camps.

The Nazis completely robbed these people of their identities. Their wedding rings were taken, their heads were shaved. They were treated as even less than sub-human. They were no longer people, they were numbers. Hannah Rigler was number 58384. 58,383 innocent people had already been murdered by the time that she and her family were taken there. The camp was filled with mountains of shoes, three people were expected to live off a bowl of water and a few cabbage leaves a day. It was torture.

In December 1944, the Nazis began ‘death marches’, forcing the prisoners to literally march till they died of famine and exhaustion. Hannah had the opportunity to escape. She had no choice but to leave her mother and sister. She was 16 years old and on the brink of death from starvation. So she attempted to buy bread from a Polish man. He called the police force on her, which led to her hiding in a barn. Here she stumbled across the 10 British Prisoners of War who saved her life.

They treated her for frostbite, killed the lice in her hair, gave her a place to sleep and provided her with food. She survived, but she never saw her family again. She was arrested by the Russians as they thought she was a spy. In 1947, she travelled to the US, where she finally built a life for herself. She attended secondary school and then went to nursing school. She spent 20 years finding the British POW who rescued her. They were later recognised as righteous among the nation.

The Holocaust was a mass genocide, which went on for 12 years, 1933-1945, leading to the deaths of eleven million people, after being tortured, forced into labour and brainwashed. Hannah Rigler’s story is one of resilience and survival, but six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, among many others, just because of their race, or rather because of Hitler’s twisted ideology and completely unjustified hatred.

Student B

In the Holocaust, they killed lots of Jews. Most of the women were killed on entering the concentration camps. The strongest people were made to work. There was hardly any food or hygiene..... No one should ever go through that.

Student C

The story of Hannah Rigler is a story that I believe should be passed down to future generations: It raises awareness of both the physical and psychological trauma holocaust survivors have been through. For me Hannah’s story was truly an eye opening experience, Although it’s not fully possible to understand the emotions and trauma she went through, it’s gives me an understanding of the difficulties holocaust survivors have experienced.

Hannah’s story starts on a Sunday of June 1941, in a town that 1/3 of the population was made up of Jews. A Jewish Lithuanian family consisting of Hannah Rigler as well as her mother and sister were forced to leave their home and conceal themselves in order to avoid the oncoming Nazi attack. Thinking Germans under Hitler’s power were civilised, they decided to stay in Lithuania instead of migrating to Russia. Unfortunately, Hannah and her family were caught by the Nazis and placed in a ghetto. If you weren’t put into a ghetto, you were taken to a synagogue to be burnt by Nazis. Hannah, her mother, and sister were moved from ghetto to ghetto until July 1944, when everyone present was told to get ready to be placed into another ghetto instead they were involuntarily taken to Auschwitz also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau (a death camp in Poland where the goal was to annihilate Jews as well as other minorities by forcing them to do hard labour).

Jews, homosexuals, disabled people and gypsies were shoved into trains that directly led them to Auschwitz. Once they arrived, men, women, and children were ordered to form two lines, one with men and another with women and children. Some women, children and elderly men were immediately sent to be killed in gas chambers. The remaining people were put into groups and assessed on how fit they were. The Nazis then tattooed a number onto their arm. That’s what they were called by, not their name instead a number. They were no longer seen as human. Hannah’s number was 58374. Upon entering, “prisoners” were stripped of any identification, heads were shaved and hair was put into a sandbag to use as a mattress for Jews to sleep on, wedding rings as well as other forms of jewellery and shoes were taken and a uniform was put on.

Across all concentration camps there was a lack of facilities, such as heating, beds, and washrooms. This resulted in an outburst of diseases. In December 1944, a group of Jews were taken on a death march with no food or water. Death marches were made to make space for new prisoners. They were told to walk until they dropped dead. Only 300 people survived the march Hannah was on. Hannah’s mother had managed to smuggle her wedding ring with her and sent Hannah to go and buy herself a loaf of bread with the ring.

Upon finding her way, she bumped into a group of British prisoners of war who helped her escape by digging a hole over their bunker and letting Hannah reside there for a few weeks. On August 27 1947, Hannah arrived in America where she managed to learn English in three months. Ultimately all the 10 men who had saved Hannah were given the ‘Righteous among the nation’ title. A private investigator in Manchester heard the story of Hannah Rigler on radio and took responsibility for locating the families of the British prisoners of war.

Student D

Hannah Rigler’s story was inspiring and an eye-opening experience as it made me more aware of what people had to go through during the Holocaust. I learned the trauma and emotions she went through to survive, for example having to leave her mother and sister behind to escape from hiding. She explained that there were many people watching as she begged for help, however they didn’t do anything as she was Jewish. They would observe her situation as if they were watching a play and clearly did not care that a young girl was starving and brutalized and would soon be murdered.

Hannah Rigler had to run for her life while starving and dealing with the fact she might never see her mother and sister ever again. Although there were many people that did nothing, there were still a few warm-hearted people who risked their lives for her to have a chance to survive. For example, a kind British Prisoner of War named Stan brought her something to eat while hiding her in a barn from the captors. Stan had to quickly leave as it was too risky and he would get caught and possibly killed by the Germans for helping a runaway prisoner. While she sat overnight in that barn, starving, filthy and freezing, she couldn’t stop thinking about her decision of leaving her mother and sister behind. What if they had been caught and killed? All these thoughts rushed into her head. She almost wished for death as she couldn’t take much more of this trauma. Thankfully, she made it out alive and arrived in America where she had managed to learn English in just three months. Hannah’s story has now been made into a book. The people that helped her along her journey were given the title ‘Righteous among the nations.’